

A MESS THAT IS HARD TO CLEAN UP

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Human Rights and NHRC

Mangaluru MLA U.T. Khader visits the protest site of the sanitation workers in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Mangaluru | Photo Credit: MANJUNATH H.S.

Pourakarmikas (sanitation workers) across Karnataka launched a strike on July 1 demanding abolition of the system of contractual employment through contractors. The strike was withdrawn four days later, with Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai promising to form a committee to work out the modalities for drafting the workers on permanent rolls of city corporations, including the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), in three months. Will solid waste management (SWM) in the State finally come out of the clutches of contractors then? The history of the struggle of pourakarmikas in Karnataka shows that this is not an easy goal.

The strike is the latest turn in a saga that can be traced back to 1976 when the Devaraj Urs-led government formed a committee led by I.P.D. Salappa to look into the issues of sanitation workers. The report of that committee, recommending direct employment of workers and welfare measures, is still awaiting implementation.

Most city corporations in Karnataka stopped direct recruitment of sanitation workers after liberalisation and issued contracts to vendors for sweeping streets as well as door-step collection and transportation of garbage. These vendors in turn recruited sanitation workers. These contractors slowly evolved into a politically well-connected and money-spinning lobby. Bengaluru, for instance, spends nearly 1,200 crore annually for SWM mostly through contractors and has faced allegations of bogus billing and kickbacks.

Sanitation workers' demand for permanent government employment, which grew loud around 2010-11, began as a protest against payment of salaries below the prescribed minimum wage, sexual abuse of the women workforce, use of violence and firings of anyone who questioned the system. Following a strike in 2016, the then Congress government announced abolition of the contract system and employment of all sanitation workers by city corporations. However, contractors managed to derail the system in part.

The Karnataka Municipalities (Pourakarmikas Recruitment) (Special Rules), 2017, categorised only those deployed to sweep the streets as pourakarmikas and brought them under a direct payment scheme, essentially on contractual employment but directly with city corporations instead of contractors. This meant the stranglehold of contractors over garbage collection and transportation (van drivers, loaders etc.) continued.

The process of bringing pourakarmikas under a direct payment scheme exposed massive corruption in the garbage contract system. Contractors had been claiming salaries for over 31,000 pourakarmikas from BBMP, but the civic body could only find 17,000-odd pourakarmikas when it brought all those working under its direct contract. Probe into the scam has made no headway till date.

During the recent strike, sanitation workers demanded that all of them be considered pourakarmikas and provided permanent employment by city corporations. The State government has now said that it will make sweepers permanent and "try to" bring other sanitation workers under the direct payment scheme. If this is implemented, city corporations would take back the role of end-to-end SWM in-house, eliminating all contracts. This assurance by the State government comes amidst the Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Ltd., a new

parastatal, being set up for SWM in the city. It has finalised the draft of a new garbage collection and transportation tender for five years. Tenders are scheduled to be floated later this month. Whether they will be floated or not will tell us whether the contractors will finally be eliminated in the sector. With Assembly elections slated in 2023 in Karnataka and BBMP polls likely before that, this question becomes all the more significant.

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